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***Learning to Honour Their Body and Blood:  
Pilgrims on the Path of Mary Magdalene.***

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This article describes the beliefs and some of the ritual practices of a group of female pilgrims visiting places in France and Catalonia that they associate with the figure of Mary Magdalene. It pays particular attention to the pilgrim's process of learning ways to relate to her own body and to her menstrual cycle. Drawing elements from neo-paganism these women reinterpret the meaning of Christian symbols and places. They consider Mary Magdalene both as a forerunner of feminism and as a model for independent women. Performing a ritual of offering menstrual blood to the earth, they establish an intimate relationship with what they identify as the "Mother Earth". Theories used to justify the beliefs in the sacrality of menstrual blood are largely derived from anthropological texts.

The following text is based on fieldwork I did accompanying groups of pilgrims who visit sites they associate with St. Mary Magdalene<sup>2</sup> in France and Catalonia. Within the context of this narrative I will share my experiences on one exclusively female pilgrimage and consider the wider implications of the material. I am particularly interested in the pilgrims' modalities of learning a set of concepts and behaviours about their own body and their menstrual cycle. Pilgrims learn to consider menstrual blood as a sacred bodily emission that they can offer to "Mother Earth"

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<sup>2</sup> Pilgrims influenced by theories deriving from what is generally identified as the "New Age movement" visiting European Catholic shrines have been studied by Weibel (2001) and Ivakhiv (2001).

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establishing an intimate exchange with her. As I will show Mary Magdalene acts as an inspiring model for these pilgrims who consider her both as a historical figure and as an archetype. Following her steps, visiting places associated to Mary Magdalene, pilgrims gradually learn to leave behind what they identify as "patriarchal structures" and discover a new "feminine way" to consider their body and to relate to "Mother Earth's body", the landscape surrounding them.

### Mary Magdalene pilgrims

In general, the pilgrims are middle-class women between ages 24 and 65. Many of them work in education or social services. A few of them lead or have lead rather marginal lives, earning just enough money to survive, squatting in "occupied houses" or coming out of drug-addiction. Some travel on their own or in small groups of friends and others go on organized pilgrimages advertised on websites and through mailing lists. These organized pilgrimages, led by one or more guides, usually last between 7 and 12 days. Those for Continental Europeans <sup>3</sup> may cost between 175 euros and 400 euros, depending on accommodations. Travelling in their own cars, the pilgrims decide how to spend money on gasoline and food. These "Magdalene Tours" are advertised as spiritual journeys or quests for "Mary Magdalene". They centre upon the "mysteries" related to Her, as proposed by a number of books written in the 1980s and 90s. Such beliefs and theories have most recently been summarized and widely popularized by Dan Brown's best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) <sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of pilgrimages led in English and advertised on the web basically for UK, Canada and US citizens, prices are disproportionately higher. They range around 2500 euros including transport, accommodation and food in France, but not the flight to and from France.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the theories associated with Mary Magdalene in these journeys derive from the bestseller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982) written by the three British journalists Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln and later recuperated and reinterpreted by authors like Margaret Starbird (1993) and Lynn Picknett (2003). Following the authors, the Holy Grail, would have been the royal blood (*Sangraal/Sang real* in French) of the descendants of Christ, carried in her womb by Mary Magdalene, wife of Jesus and mother of his children. The pregnant Mary Magdalene, personification of the Holy Grail, being the cup/womb carrying Christ's blood, fled to Southern France and lived there until her death. As for Christ's descendants they married with members of the Royal family of the Merovingians and their

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The tour guides know this kind of literature well. They do not stick to a particular theory or author but tend to create their own blend of theories. They usually add to this personal mix the result of their "personal sensations about Mary Magdalene" and information "She herself" may have given them in a vision or in a dream. Some pilgrims have read books about these "Magdalene mysteries", but many of them have not. They decided to join the group because of "things they have heard about Mary Magdalene" from friends, or because they have always "felt attracted to her". The places visited belong to what is generally identified as "the route of Mary Magdalene" and include Catholic sanctuaries dedicated to the saint in Southern France but also shrines venerating "Black Virgins" or sites linked to the Cathars and the Templar Knights.

Here I will present my experience from one such pilgrimage called "*Mary Magdalene's Path, initiatory pilgrimage of the blood*". Like the others I have been on, it seems to be a kind of bricolage of ideas, symbols and rituals, whose specific content depends on the knowledge and personal experiences of the leaders and the participants. I accompanied this group of Spanish and Catalan women in August 2004<sup>5</sup>.

Their pilgrimage forms part of the activities of a wider set of women I have been following for more than a year called "Goddess Wood". This set theoretically includes all the women who have once participated in one of its activities or workshops (around 300 women), but there are maybe 30 or 40 women who regularly attend its monthly gathering for the new moon. The seven-day pilgrimage

bloodline continues today. Trying to conceal the true importance of Mary Magdalene and therefore of women, in Christian history, the Catholic Church would have persecuted several of the religious movements that knew and transmitted the secret of the "Sangraal", movements like that of the Cathars, the Templar Knights, the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons.

Anne and Daniel Meurois-Givaudan (2001,1998) are also influential authors. They relate the life of Mary Magdalene in Palestine, her relationship with Jesus and also her solitary life in Southern France. Unlike Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, who base their theories on what they describe as a historical research, the Givaudans say that they have found their information in the "registers of the Akasha". These are some metaempirical books where all humanity's memories are recorded. The authors access them through a special kind of out of body experience during which their spirit leaves their body.

<sup>5</sup> I used a pseudonym for the pilgrimage leader and changed also the name of the women's group she had created.

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(only for women) is led by Dana, an Argentinean living in Barcelona. From 1995 on Dana had been leading workshops about "female spirituality" and about the menstrual cycle. In 2001 she founded Goddess Wood. She has organized so far three pilgrimages to places related to Mary Magdalene, in summer 1998, 2000 and 2002. The first pilgrimage in 1998 was open to men as well.

Dana came to Barcelona in her twenties to escape political persecution in Buenos Aires. She and her family had been jailed during the resistance movement of the 1970s. Like most of the leaders of these pilgrimages, Dana is somewhat protective about her past. She and the other two Catalan women that help her to lead the group are both aged between 45 and 55.

The evening of departure the 24 participants arrive from Catalonia, and from as far away as Seville and Bilbao, at the starting point, a small town not far from Gerona (Catalonia). A few are already part of Goddess Wood but most of them are new to the group and do not know each other. The women shift between Catalan and Spanish while getting acquainted; their age ranges from 24 to 55. The tour was advertised as an "initiatory pilgrimage of the blood following the route of Mary Magdalene" (*peregrinaje iniciático de la sangre en la senda de Maria Magdalena*).

On the third day the group sits in the wood surrounding the cave of the Sainte-Baume in Provence (Southern France), where a Christian legend has it that Mary Magdalene lived during her last 30 years. The 27 women scattered among rocks and trees listen to Dana tell about Magdalene's life at the Sainte-Baume and her importance for women today as an archetype of the lover and a model of independence and power. Most of the women are crocheting with red thread, some of them are wearing a rosary on their neck. The three that are menstruating sit on mossy rocks, offering their menstrual blood to "Mother Earth", their legs covered by a long skirt. One could hardly recognize the pilgrims who had met two days before in a Catalan cafeteria, behaving as modern emancipated women beginning a common adventure. There, when I had heard Dana saying that we were "female warriors" (*guerreras*) breaking free from society's "patriarchal" limitations I had

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totally forgotten that in the trip instructions the women had been told to carry a crochet hook and a rosary with them.

During the first two days the women, particularly those new to Goddess Wood, seem to have adopted a broad set of concepts and behaviours from Dana and the other two leaders. The few women that already formed part of the Goddess Wood and regularly attended its activities had had an important role as "informal teachers" in the group, answering the rest of the pilgrims' questions and helping, through their example, to consolidate new acquired behaviours.

In her introductory talk Dana had used complex notions that went unexplained. Did these women already have a shared set of ideas and terms or did some have to find out about their meaning on their own, not daring to ask the leaders directly and to show their ignorance? During the first drive from Spain to the French Camargue and during the other long drives from one pilgrimage site to the other I sought to learn if the other 5 women in the minivan I was sharing had clear ideas about Dana's talks and some of her terms. Each had a different background regarding "spiritual matters". Some of them had not understood some of Dana's notions, others had learned about them from a book or a workshop and tried to share their knowledge with the others. If I asked only one of the women in the van what a term she had just used meant, the dialogue swiftly turned into a group discussion and was used by the pilgrims to tell about their own experiences, which ranged from confirming the validity of the concept to being just very loosely linked.

Some terms and concepts seemed to be shared by everyone in the minivan, a sort of basic lexicon, that included concepts like: "Mother Earth, energy, personal energy field, previous lives, the Goddess" or "to resonate with somebody or something". When I asked about these concepts the women looked at me surprised and felt that I was kidding. I then had to explain that I had a vague idea about what the term meant but just wanted to be sure if I had really got it. Even if there could be slight differences among the definitions or explanations the women gave me about these concepts, at the end they reached a common consensus. Other

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concepts like: "patriarchal society, collective unconscious" or "to unify frequencies" were not familiar to all of them but had been learned by some in workshops or reading. Other terms, referring to "spiritual" groups, places or techniques, were keywords that unlocked the doors to a whole "mythological cluster", terms like "Cathars, Black Virgins, Macchu Picchu or yoga". For these clusters it was impossible to come to general agreement. Depending on the workshops, books read and one's personal "feelings", there were different theories and attitudes. But even if, for instance, there was no general agreement about whether the Cathars had reached a high spiritual level because of their ascetic practices or should instead be dismissed because they despised matter, nobody became angry or upset. It was soon agreed that everyone resonated in a different way with "the whole Cathar business" (*el tema de los cataros*) and there might even be someone who had been a Cathar in a previous life, or one of their slaughterers. This could explain different reactions and opinions about them.

There also were terms belonging to a vocabulary forged inside Goddess Wood that could be explained in the minivan only by Roser, one of the Goddess Wood veterans. Occasionally not even one of the "*hermanas de la furgoneta*" (minivan's sisters) could explain some concept and as a last resort they said "to ask Dana".

### Shifting to a "feminine" worldview

There are several shifts<sup>6</sup> that the pilgrim is invited to make in order to fully participate and profit from the journey. It is suggested to her that she does not need to accept rationally the new ways of looking at things that are being presented but might permit herself to play with them, to take them as if they were real and to see what happens. The same technique is suggested to women during rituals or devotional acts. Dana invites them to participate in rituals with the innocence of children and to play with the ritual elements and then see what

<sup>6</sup> In my analysis I have taken as a reference Luhrmann's study (1989) about witches in contemporary England and her attentive description of the way Londoners come to find magic persuasive.

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happens. The pilgrim may consider this new ritual way only temporarily useful, while the pilgrimage lasts, but can eventually get persuaded and begin to make it her own. As each pilgrim has a different background in "spiritual matters" it is hard to know where this process of shifting away from one's own pre-pilgrimage cosmology begins for each one of them. One of the aims of the pilgrimage is to bring everybody to a common level of understanding, to "unify frequencies".

The first night, before going to sleep in shared bedrooms, the women were reminded: "We are pilgrims". Each one should try to "be frugal, as pilgrims are" and take with her on the trip only the most essential things, leaving the rest in Dana's house. The next morning the group gathered in Dana's house and began with some dancing that was said to help to fully awaken, to "move our energy" and to "get us in contact with Mother Earth<sup>7</sup>". In order to memorize the group's names each woman had to spell her complete first name and repeat all the names of the women before her. Everyone should try to use her complete first name. This was the first shift: being called by a different name again and again, until the memorizing game was over. Spanish and Catalan women tend to have at least two first names and the one not used tends to be "Maria". Some women told me that beginning to use it made them pay attention to the relation they had to Mother Mary through their names<sup>8</sup>. A second shift took place on a temporal level. Explaining the ideals shared by members of Goddess Wood, Dana invites each woman to abandon the solar dimension of time, the solar year divided in 12 months and to enter the lunar dimension, the lunar year divided into 13 moons of 28 days. In this way time is no longer ruled by the sun, symbol of the masculine power but by the moon, the feminine power<sup>9</sup>. Goddess Wood members meet for every new

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<sup>7</sup> Very often there is a confusion between the "Goddess" and the "Mother Earth", sometimes the two terms are used as synonyms, other times "Mother Earth" is interpreted to be the materialization of the "Goddess" or one of her thousand faces and names.

<sup>8</sup> Like Mary Magdalene the Virgin is considered to be a priestess of the Goddess whose power and importance before and during Jesus' life has been underplayed by the Catholic Church.

<sup>9</sup> Mails sent to members of Goddess Wood normally have as a date not the day, month and year but only the indication of the moon, e.g. new moon of June of 2004.

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moon to mark this new kind of rhythm because “those who control your time control your energy”. The importance of linear time is minimized and the necessity to “get back” to a cyclic way of considering time is continuously stressed.

Pilgrims learn slowly to pay attention to small events that may seem fortuitous and analyse them on the base of a list of correspondences that includes the four elements (fire, earth, water, air) colours, gems, bodily organs and so on (Luhmann 1989:119, 129). But this question of coincidences is never fully explained, pilgrims learn it little by little retaining the leader’s analyses of events. Five of them are following a two-year course led by Dana, to learn the basic notions and abilities to become a “priestess”. They sometimes comment on some things they observe in the landscape or try to help less experienced pilgrims to analyse some event. There is always something mysterious about these associations and those who retain the key to interpret them are regarded as “researchers” that have been investigating for years.

Dana and her followers refer to Christian concepts but reinterpret them, since they consider teachings of “the Church” anti-feminine<sup>10</sup>. Humanity must re-learn to worship matter and “Mother Earth” as in ancient, matriarchal times<sup>11</sup>. By honouring matter one also honours the female side and dancing and singing are particularly important as typical feminine activities. “We are living in times of acceleration”, as is said by different religions and also by “scientists”, and this acceleration can permit us to increment our vibration and to ascend. Dana hands out photocopies with song lyrics to be kept at hand, as they may be needed at any moment.

<sup>10</sup> Due to the general Catholic background of all the women Dana always paid attention to speak as respectful as possible of elements and beliefs associated with Catholicism.

<sup>11</sup> Dana’s teachings and the ideas shared by committed members of Goddess Wood derive from a complex set of theories that are shared by Neo-pagans studied by Magliocco (2001, 2004). These theories derive from authors (Stone 1976; Eisler 1987) who believe in the existence of an ancient matriarchal society in Europe (Gimbutas 1989) that finished with the Indo-European invasions (4500 b. C-2500 b.C.), and interpret ancient mythology and the Ancient Testament accordingly. Their interpretations shall show the distortion of female Goddess figures through the patriarchal system of beliefs imposed by Indo-Europeans. Articles contained in Goodison and Morris’ collection (1999) show the weakness of Gimbutas’ theories influenced by Bachofen (1861) and Graves (1948). For a full discussion of these theories and their influence on pilgrims see Fedele (2004).



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Pilgrims sing songs about the Goddess. She invites the women to insert the singing and the dancing in their lives and during the pilgrimage to integrate the group and “unify frequencies”.

### Mary Magdalene

Dana mentioned Mary Magdalene for the first time on our arrival at Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, where a Catholic legend holds that three Marys - Mary Magdalene, Mary Salomé and Mary Jacobé, together with Sara - arrived on a boat from Palestine after the crucifixion. The church to the Saintes Maries is said to be constructed on a temple dedicated to Artemis and Dana spoke about the Great Goddess, matriarchal times and the “Black Virgins” as representation of the ancient Goddess<sup>12</sup>. Speaking about the life of Jesus and his disciples, pilgrims are invited to practice a “theology of suspicion” (*teología de la sospecha*) that “challenges the misogyny of previous interpretations.” Dana explained to me that “the historical information that has come down to us about Jesus and his life is very poor and that one of the errors of the Catholic Church had actually been that they focused too much on the historical events and left aside the symbolic part.”

Mary Magdalene, the places related to her and her teachings are taken as an occasion to invite pilgrims to establish a new way to see and relate with their body and the surrounding world. At the same time Magdalene is taken as an example to follow and is ambiguously considered both:

a) As a historical person who has many traits in common with the pilgrims:

she is a priestess of the Goddess and knows about the secrets of the feminine power, she is independent and revolutionary for her times. As such Mary Magdalene serves as example of a woman who knows about the sacredness of her body and

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<sup>12</sup> Dana refers here to a theory by Ean Begg (1985) who like others before him postulated a relation between Europe’s “Black Virgins” and pagan goddesses.

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bodily emissions and is therefore named "*guardiana de la sangre*". Through her wisdom and experience pilgrims can recover this ancient knowing, perceive their body as sacred and receive power and healing from "Mother Earth".

b) As the archetype of the lover, who in Christian religion has been transformed into the sinner and prostitute:

as such Mary Magdalene serves as a reference for contemporary women striving for their independence, the social acknowledgement of their power and the social acceptance of them as powerful women. She is particularly important for women who have decided not to have children and/or do not have a formal relationship with a man.

In both cases Mary Magdalene, her person (a) or archetype (b) is used as a reference for a whole set of values, interpretations and rules that the pilgrims end up making their own. These values associated with her are not part of a strictly defined set but are the result of a constant negotiation. One of the most debated items was whether Mary Magdalene had children or not. Dana claimed that she did not perceive Mary Magdalene as being a mother, but rather as a woman not bound to any man. The leader underlined that it was no coincidence that the theories about "Her" being the wife of Jesus and mother of his children derived from male authors.

According to Dana through the centuries there has been a secret church of Mary Magdalene whose members knew about her true importance. Troubadours, Cathars and Templar Knights were linked to this Magdalene Church and this whole secret movement stretched from Southern Spain over to Catalonia and particularly to the area around Gerona where the group started the pilgrimage. In some way the group is identified as a continuation of that Secret Church that can finally re-emerge in the twentieth century because times are ready for it and humanity is approaching a great change. Dana underlines the temporal continuity of the group's beliefs and rituals with previous movements, continuity not only with this secret Church but also with pre-patriarchal societies and with the witches that have kept

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secret female wisdom alive. These references however are not so clear and coherent as those of witches described by Luhrmann (1989) or Neo-pagans described by Magliocco (2001, 2004). Perhaps this is because these women do not form part of a major group or movement that has clearly defined rules and rituals, but are loosely linked to what can be identified as "feminist spirituality" (Fedele 2004:69-73). They share most of the assumptions proposed by more established movements as the Wiccans, but relate to them in a more flexible way.

For the group there is also a spatial continuity with the secret Church of Mary Magdalene. Catalan women feel proud to hear that movements related to this Church were present in their country. One of the pilgrimage's aims is to fortify and re-vitalize this connection between places related to Mary Magdalene in Southern France and in Catalonia. The sense of continuity between previous religious groups pertaining to the secret Church and this group is made clear. As one woman put it: "the troubadours were the ancient hippies".

Dana explained that the Catholic Church spoke about Mary Magdalene as a sinner and a weeper to take power from her. Mary Magdalene retired to live in the cave of the Sainte-Baume not because of repentance, as the Catholics say, but to fully dedicate to her spiritual practice. Dana has recovered an ancient litany of Mary Magdalene and substituted some phrases referring to her as a sinner by "more positive phrases" because "we (the women) are already beaten down enough" (*ya bastante machacadas estamos*). The re-signification of Catholic saints, texts and places is constant. Symbols, figures and places considered to have been stolen and their significance distorted are now restored to their "original" status and meaning.

When asked specific questions about the life of Mary Magdalene at the Sainte-Baume, Dana used to shift from (a) to (b) explaining that Mary Magdalene living there was a legend, and that we were dealing with "metaphors". One central point, constantly underlined in Goddess Wood is "the power of metaphors" because "the unconscious understands metaphors". Rituals are seen as a big metaphor understood by individuals' unconscious that helps to heal psychological wounds.

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Similarly to the witches studied in England in the 1980s by Tanya Luhrmann, these pilgrims seem to be strongly influenced by Jungian psychology (1989:172,280). They also share many other ideas with Luhrmann's witches but it seems that these pilgrims and their leaders do not have such a clear cosmology and are less self-conscious about their beliefs. These women do not seem to feel the need to show others that they are right or learned. They consider that schemes and theories are men's thing and "we already had too much of it". The tension between the formal explanations and the denial of the need for rationalizations is constantly there, in Dana's discourse but also in that of my "minivan sisters". On one hand ideas and information about the visited sites must be shared with the group in order to create a common basis that permits the credibility of common behaviour and of rituals. On the other hand the importance of theories is constantly undermined and their relativity underlined. Responding to a woman asking for more details about the rituals, Dana answered: "this is not a course" stressing that the aim of this pilgrimage was for women to stay together and share the experience, not to learn about theories.

**The importance of menstruation**

Before entering the "sacred" wood of the Sainte-Baume pilgrims are invited to ask permission and to ask for healing, wisdom and beauty. They learn that in this wood is the cave where Mary Magdalene lived and where before her the Celtic druids had already been living and working. This time Dana spoke about a "historical Mary Magdalene" and made no reference to the fact that the saint's presence at the Sainte-Baume derives from a legend. Women are told that this forest was sacred to the druids and still is a magical place inhabited by powerful "spirits of nature". Pilgrims should take their time, following no exact program because programs and schemes are masculine things. Women should just listen to the wood and permit themselves to "resonate" with it and its spirits. In the middle of the wood pilgrims sit down in a circle to listen to Dana. Women who are menstruating are invited to

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offer their blood to "Mother Earth", sitting down on mossy surfaces, because moss is normally clean and its chlorophyll helps in stopping the blood flow. Women are told to get in contact with a more "wild" dimension, remembering ancient times, pre-patriarchal times when women were powerful and their bodies were not blocked by patriarchal schemes.

Dana explained that women menstruate every moon cycle and differentiate themselves from the other mammals, who are fertile only twice a year. This demonstrates the importance of women in human evolution and underlines the centrality of menstrual blood for this process. Women's bodily emissions, and most of all the menstrual blood and the milk, are sacred. On the contrary the "Catholic Church" has no respect for nature and does not consider matter to be sacred. For this reason menstrual blood is considered as impure and related in catholic terms to the fall of Eve. Dana underlines that one has to ascend to heaven with one's body, as the Virgin Mary did. Therefore our first commitment (*compromiso*) is to blood and to our bodily emissions that are sacred. We have to understand that the material is not impure, as the Church teaches.

Dana's ideas about the sacrality of menstrual blood derived from her personal research in "feminist issues", Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism. Her "feminist readings" included texts like those of Simone de Beauvoir, Johann Jakob Bachofen<sup>13</sup> and others more related to feminist spirituality like the books of Diane Stein<sup>14</sup>. During the pilgrimage Dana referred to Lara Owen's article "The Sabbath of Women" (1991), the Spanish version of which is easily available on the web. In this article and in her later book (Owen 1993) Owen argues that in ancient matriarchal societies menstrual blood was considered to be sacred. This notion changed once the patriarchal ideals our current cultural system is based upon developed and

<sup>13</sup> Some of the books Dana referred to were: Beauvoir, S. De 1989 (orig. 1949) *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books Editions; Engels, F. 1884 *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*; and Bachofen, J.J. 1861 *Das Mutterrecht (The Mother Right)*.

<sup>14</sup> In the early nineties only a few books about feminist spirituality had been translated into Spanish, one of them was: Stein, D. 1990  *Casting the Circle. A Women's Book of Rituals*. Berkeley, California: The Crossing Press.

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menstrual blood began to be treated as impure. The author describes her discovery of the importance of menstruation in these terms:

To think of menstruation as a source of power for women completely went against my conditioning, and yet I knew in my heart that it was true. I realized that in the dichotomy between what our culture teaches us, and my gut reaction of "Yes! Of course!" to this ancient wisdom, there was a lot of energy. When you find the places where a culture splits from a natural truth you have found a key--a way inside the diseases of the culture. I began to understand that the split between, on the one hand, the wisdom and power of bleeding that I was perceiving, and on the other, modern society's attitudes to the womb, lay at the heart of the subjugation and denial of female reality and experience.

Pilgrims offer their blood to the "Earth" individually but also as a group, doing what they call the "ritual offering of the blood to the Earth". This ritual is the most important of the whole pilgrimage and is said to represent the creation of a strong link between the women of the group and between each woman and "Mother Earth". This ritual is secret and women are asked not to tell anyone, to keep the surprise for future pilgrims and also to maintain the ritual's power (Luhmann 1989:250-3).

Pilgrims are told that it is important to offer menstrual blood to "Mother Earth", because women did it in ancient times. This blood nourishes the "Earth" and perhaps today there are so many wars because this blood is no longer offered spontaneously and without pain to "Mother Earth". Some women of the group tended to describe "Mother Earth" as a good and caring being, whereas Dana stressed that there was also a destructive side in the feminine aspect that was a necessary counterpart to the creative side. The connection between the shedding of blood during wars and the necessity for women to "recuperate" their offering of blood is always presented as a hypothesis, but still it is there. Women who offered

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their blood told me about their feelings of nurturing the "Earth" and healing it from aggressions the "Earth" was receiving through humanity's selfish actions.

During the pilgrimage, Estrella, one of the younger women, was invited to tell others about her two-year experience offering blood to "Mother Earth". She had been taught to do these offerings by a Mexican "shaman" woman who regularly visits Barcelona to give workshops. This *abuela* (granny) told women that they should not throw out in the trash their menstrual blood that is their vital essence and power. Estrella has been offering her blood each month, bleeding directly into the earth or putting the sanitary towels into a bowl of water and later squeezing the blood out of them into the bowl. "It is like an adventure; you put your essence into the Earth that listens to you and sends you her medicine." The first time she offered her blood Estrella was feeling very tired, "low in energy" (baja en energía). She asked "Mother Earth" for help and offered "Her" as well the only thing she had with her, some kiwis. Some days later she was given by a friend of hers two kiwis that had the form of kidneys and Estrella understood that it was because of a problem in her kidney that she had been feeling so tired. Offering your blood permits you to "establish a dialogue with the Earth," Estrella says. "She speaks to you not by words but using fruits and symbols, or talking to you in your dreams".

According to Dana and her followers, menstrual blood and women's reproductive organs are the place where woman's greatest power, her creativity is situated. Honouring her own blood the woman honours her power and herself. She should keep in mind that she does not have to use this power to create children, but can employ it in her work or in her home. Again there is continuity with "ancient times" and with contemporaries considered the guardians of old traditions: indigenous women. The term "indigenous people" (*los indígenas*) and its feminine counterpart "indigenous women" (*las mujeres indígenas*) is used to refer to natives from Central and South America, whereas the term *nativos americanos*, refers to American natives in general. Pilgrims tend to have a "panindian" conception of native Americans, talking about them as if they had a common set of beliefs and ritual

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practices. There is a quite romantic and Rousseauan vision of American natives considered to be the guardians of the ancient wisdom of "Mother Earth" and of rituals that are similar to those "we once had". The fact that sometimes ritual elements and sequences are borrowed from them is justified, saying that Europeans have lost their own rituals and can find some equivalents in "indigenous rituals". Following a rather evolutionistic vision, these natives are seen as having similar rituals to those Europeans once had.

**Conclusion**

Pilgrims see themselves as if they were re-learning to interpret Christian symbols in their "original" meaning and to honour the feminine aspect of the Divine in the proper way. These women admit that they themselves create the rituals they perform, but they do so by getting in contact with ancient "memories". Their aim is to develop a new and positive perception of the female body and the key for this process seems to be menstrual blood and the meanings ascribed to it. Anthropologists have described menstrual meanings, taboos and rituals in different cultures, trying to understand them in their social and cultural context. In this case the anthropologist is challenged to analyse menstrual rituals created by women who refer to authors (Owen 1991) that have themselves been influenced by anthropological studies about menstruation (Gottlieb and Buckley 1988).

The re-interpretation of Christian legends, holy texts and songs offered by Dana is appealing to these pilgrims that have a Christian background. They seem to not want to renounce the symbols and places belonging to their tradition or to embrace a strict set of beliefs. Dana takes ideas and values derived from feminist spirituality and applies them to the Christian belief-system. She proposes to use Christian terms like "sisters" or "pilgrimage" and to re-signify objects like the rosary, the chalice or the cross. Not comfortable with the restrictions the "Catholic Church" is



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imposing upon them and with its rules regarding sexuality, marriage and procreation, these women are fabricating a sort of feminist Christianity that they describe using terms borrowed from feminist spirituality. They claim their right to be priestesses, to invoke and even to incarnate Mary Magdalene, the lover of Jesus, his feminine counterpart. As a historical person Mary Magdalene is seen as a forerunner, a powerful woman who belonged to the ancient tradition of the Goddess religion and blended her knowledge with that of Jesus, showing that the union between the Christian and the Goddess' tradition is possible. As an archetype Mary Magdalene is seen as a reference and a model that offers women the possibility to live out their creative power without being mothers. Pilgrims tend to associate and to justify the way they consider their body and their sexuality through characteristics they attribute to Mary Magdalene.

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